

# SMALL TALK PRAYERS

Shelby Tisdale

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

Blades of stained glass struck my white, thick elbows with stoplight hues. A bead of sweat crossed my collar bone, and I yanked my neckline higher.

“There’s my friend!” Hugging Ms. Keisha was like hugging a bag of popcorn fresh out of the microwave, while the kernels still jumped inside.

“We are so puh-roud of you and your sister! Your Mama can’t stop talkin’ in Sunday School ‘bout how smart you are! And beautiful too!” My shoulders were like the armrests on a chair that was missing a leg, straight and lopsided and still, growing stiffer as Ms. Keisha squeezed my waist. I turned to my older sister who sat against the back wall like one of the fake boulders that rich cities use to hide electrical boxes. Ms. Keisha knew not to hug her.

In fact, if you weren’t me, hugging my sister was a relatively similar experience to hugging an electrical box—if it was on fire and growled. Last week, our pastor’s wife tried to tap her on the shoulder; my sister hissed, took my shoulders like a steering wheel, and bulldozed me into Ms. Mary. I’m a means to an end, I thought, and didn’t take it personally. Neither did Ms. Mary.

People milled about but I was within myself, processing one of those weighty and nameless feelings that I only felt in a crowded room. I could feel the cotton in my t-shirt curve with my waist, blue jeans pinned into loose stomach skin. The air thickened and stirred with each spit sympathetic syllable, and I wondered if God was anything like Ms. Anette, who sat beside me on the back pew and couldn’t die. I liked thinking of God as stubborn and wrinkly, as an old woman who answered her front door with a gun behind her back. I wondered if God was afraid of Jackson, Mississippi, too.

I didn’t talk to Ms. Anette much anymore, mostly because if you asked, “How are you?” she’d list the reasons she’d die before the end of the week. I was glad I wasn’t expected to ask how God was doing.

I meandered toward my sister, knowing that if I stepped within her reach, she’d latch around my leg like a needy child and refuse to release me. I popped her

bubble of space like a nosy and stupid twig.

“Don’t leave me,” she said like I had the option. I stood in her forceful embrace like a chained and anxious dog, separate from the stirring Baptist congregation buzz. She tapped her middle finger against an uplifted thumb and chattered her teeth like a rodent. It was her way of saying she wanted attention, or a napkin (depending on the circumstances). One-legged and pretending that being pinned to the floor by my Adidas was normal, I discussed politics; she asserted that no matter the issue, the answer was that she should become supreme leader of the world and everyone should love her. She wanted to buy an island, she said, and she’d been watching YouTube videos on Mongolian geography.

I should have cared more. My leg felt possessed by a shameless spirit, while my conscious limbs capitulated to the numb of their brother. I adjusted each misplaced strand of my hair, glancing at my sister’s disheveled dead ends that lingered against my foot. Mama once taught my sister how to sign “prostitute” and “stupid” in ASL, which seemed to lighten the laborious Southern Baptist demands of side hugs and small talk. She sat against the wall in protest of chairs replacing pews and called Mama names with her enlightened hands.

My sister called Mr. Henry my father’s pet. Daddy found him under a bridge and got him an apartment through his nonprofit job housing Mississippi’s homeless. Daddy worked with many abrasive and manipulative men, but Henry always smiled, always saw the sunshine. He had one arm, the other he lost drunk and waving at the people opposite his side of a train track (who we assume were telling him to move). I watched Henry shaking his hand in fellowship across the room, nodding his balding head with the kind of contentment that told me he wasn’t sure where he was, but he was happy to be there. In the middle of summer, Henry would update us on the stats of football teams that didn’t exist, and we’d politely agree. Mama said it didn’t matter if we listened; Henry just wanted to talk.

Henry, Anette, Keisha, Sister—their words simmered in that frying pan of a sanctuary. I pried

*“I wondered if God was afraid  
of Jackson, Mississippi, too.”*

my leg and sat beside Mama, my waistband buttons pressing further into my curled belly. I listened. God listened. God held a spatula and stirred the voices in Southside Baptist Church; I felt myself starting to evaporate as the preacher stepped to the pulpit, as my collar sank again, and I readjusted it. I sank again and readjusted.

God didn't know it was 10:15—time to speak and feel motionless amid a flow of bodies and shameless exchange of thoughts. Should I have been shameless? My shame was waterproof mascara and the breakfast I didn't eat. Did God eat breakfast? Did He fast and pray for some meaningful exchange of words and prayers, and did he feel shame?

“Can I get an Amen?”

The amens formed a scattered chorus, with varying amplitudes of faith and joy.

“Let's take about five minutes to stretch our legs and greet one another.”

I'd only survived the small talk prelims. The pastor stepped from the stage, and the sanctuary stirred again.

I asked God how he was doing. I prayed He would never die. △



## *Lost and Found*

**James Harden**

Second Place—Other Media

Digital painting

## *Vivien Leigh, Manic Debutante Undone*

**Gracie Rowland**

Blanche DuBois tipped me into madness, didn't she? Like my mother's copper kettle,  
boiling with froth, tipping black tea 'til painted porcelain overflows,  
letting the madness stain the sheep's rug as it trails down the cherrybark parlor table.  
My body has no home, my mind its own mercenary; I relinquish spine and flesh with grace.  
I contain multitudes, I contain beauty. Even the moon envies my laughter, my ravishment.  
*I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.*

Manic depressive, manic depressive they tell me. I am a creative, not crazy.  
Electroshock therapy and Laurence's fisted anger broke my bones, my marrow,  
shattered my glimmering mirrors 'til they glared, 'til they shone with acrimony.  
My beauty overwhelms them, that hateful world. Fear knows me not,  
but it knows them intimately. I went to bed with glory and woke up wounded.  
*Oh, in my youth I excited some admiration. But look at me now!*

Nothing is real, nothing is real! Nothing but this Aegean blue tiled floor on which I lie, each square  
painted with pink and yellow chrysanthemums round the corners, a garden.  
I will love this floor forever, my impregnable fortress of embrace, my ceramic paradise.  
I am a god, while they are a wasteful creation, scared by their own mortality. Embrace the change,  
never the continuity. I welcome death with impulse, crawling over broken glass to please the screen.  
*I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can't be alone!*